

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Dusk is a held breath. As colour leaks from the sky, there is a fleeting sharpening of senses – an acute feeling of the moment intensifying (the final roll call of birds, light that is not light but afterlight) before the inevitable fade to night. It is a between-time, the passing of one state into the next. There is a certain uncanniness to this transition, the definite, daylit world ceding control to the unknown dark. “I know not how it falls on me,” Emily Brontë writes, “This summer evening, hushed and lone;/ Yet the faint wind comes soothingly/ With something of an olden tone.” At such times, we may become more porous, extra-reflective. Memories surface. Feelings settle.

Occasionally, on nights when the moon surfaces, swollen and bright, this sensation is prolonged. That definite world is still there – its houses with shut curtains, its trees and telegraph poles and empty fields – but now it is silvered, half-luminous, half-shadow. It cannot help looking like a dream in which something familiar has been skewed, redrawn to be almost the same *but not quite*.

Rhiannon Salisbury’s paintings begin with pre-existing images: famous artworks, fashion editorials and adverts. She keeps a bank of them on her laptop, a treasure trove of visual references, moods, compositions, campaigns. There is no overarching theme, but often they are opulent, unabashed in their celebrations of excess. Many self-consciously reference art history. This bank has been growing since she was a teenager when she began sketching from fashion magazines. Although there were clothes all around her (an aunt ran a shop that she and her sister modelled for, joining for weekend stock hunts at markets), this sketching was often an exercise in opposition. The fashion image is a distorted reimagining of the world. One that may threaten the viewer with its ideas about femininity and siren calls of out-of-reach luxury. A sketch can become a form of neutralisation – a parody, these qualities amplified or twisted to reveal their inner hideousness.

Salisbury’s earlier paintings reflected this idea, their saturated colours and oozing shapes a feverish response to the source imagery, luridly confrontational. The works in this show are more ambiguous. They retain their capacity to disquiet, but like a landscape hushed at dusk or bleached by moonlight, they are more subtle in the transformations they enact – more like a dream than a nightmare. As with a dream, they filter aspects of inner world and outer experience (relationships, feelings, secrets, memories) through surreal, slightly off-kilter scenarios that are as ethereal as they are unsettling. They are, as the artist says, “an alternate reality based in reality.”

Three paintings take inspiration from Gucci’s 2022 Year of the Tiger campaign. Two depict a model reclining on a patterned sofa, a tiger at her feet. Salisbury reinterprets this image twice over in different palettes, each bringing out different atmospheres. One is brighter, more imbued with the traditional symbolism of the tiger - luck, good fortune – as well as the strangeness of this wild creature in a domestic setting. The other is darker, the figure on the sofa melting away into the dusk. Some probing of the fashion image’s tendency towards subliminal messaging remains (how much does a campaign like this play Western fashion’s long history of exoticizing the East?), but it mingles with other ideas. Tigers are powerful symbols in dream culture too, connoting, among other things, vitality, passion, and courage. Of course, there is the question of what is

happening to the tiger in the dream. It is caged? In hot pursuit? Lurking in the shadows? How fiercely is it guarding that expensive handbag?

Other works pay homage to or hold echoes of earlier generations of painters. 'Twilight Pins a Star' is a luminous reinterpretation of Pedro Americo's 'The Night escorted by the Geniuses of Study and Love' (1883) while 'Two Red Women (Untitled)' was not painted with Millais in mind, but still, he seems to hover over the pair's shoulders. To Salisbury, the painting also alludes to her and her sister – the figures holding an intimacy that is not shared with the watching audience. Another work 'Umbrellas (After Renoir)' begins with a Dolce & Gabbana advert and ends in a spectacular display of colour and fused skirts – the effect somewhere between coquettish and haunting.

There is a journey that happens between source image and final painting. It is partly the practicalities of creation: sketches, first marks, the swift, decisive process of manoeuvring around an abundance of paint while it is still wet enough to create these swirling, liquid shapes. Sometimes the paint is poured, oil-spill like. Sometimes it is layered thickly over a period of weeks until it rises in mounds and bumps from the canvas. Beyond that, there is the flow state. Salisbury works intuitively, following the paint, becoming so absorbed in the image that everything else blurs and disappears. In such a state, unexpected images and inflections rise to the surface. The subconscious erupts in all its unease and ecstasy, its darting, hard-to-pin-down preoccupations, desires, and mythologies. In beginning with a pre-existing image and turning it into something else, Salisbury opens up a twilight space to let the unworded and inchoate rush in and begin to make itself known.

What do we dream of when we look at a fashion image? The cynic's answer would be that we are encouraged to dream of a so-called better life: more beauty, more stuff, a more fantastic (and fantastical) way of being, all to be achieved via what we can buy or at the very least yearn to buy. But fashion has also been a profoundly surreal genre of photography, as theatrical and confrontational as it is glossily aspirational. At its best, it makes us aware that we are in a strange and meticulously composed dreamland, collaborating on a project of the imagination that begins with the designer, the photographer, the artistic director, the stylist, the make-up artist and so on, and ends with the viewer.

In the midst of all this is the model. She is both herself and not-self. Even if she retains agency, not just directed on where to stand or sit, she ultimately becomes a flat image. She is playing a role, her own face becoming a mask. She is a cipher for everyone else's visions and wants, a surface with endless symbolic possibility. In Salisbury's paintings, the faces are often indistinct or abstracted to the point of being unrecognisable. Another imaginative transition has occurred, this mirror world imbued with new reflections and unexpected reverberations.

- *Rosalind Jana, 2023*

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